



The slave labourers who worked on the US Capitol are portrayed by the Ayinde Dance Troupe of Richmond, Virginia.

Dealing with the legacy of slavery

Two hundred people symbolically scrubbed the steps of the slave-built US Capitol during a forum on connecting communities. John Bond reports.

How do we answer racism? That question will be focused this August at the World Conference Against Racism in Durban, South Africa.

It is a vital question. Racism causes widespread pain and anger in most countries, and this has frequently led to conflict. The gulf in wealth between the rich and poor worlds is growing, and broadly this is a gulf between white and non-white races. If it keeps growing, sooner or later it will lead to major international conflagrations.

If there is to be change, it needs to be undergirded by action which breaks down racial barriers in and between countries. A forum in Washington DC in June brought together people who are doing this work in a wide range of organizations—city councils, multicultural bodies, universities, churches, think-tanks.

The forum was convened by MRA, and hosted by Agenda for Reconciliation, Hope in the Cities and the Faith and Politics Institute. The National League of Cities was one of several partnering organizations. The theme—‘Connecting communities for reconciliation and justice’—expressed its approach.

As one forum initiator, Rob Corcoran, explained: ‘We need to connect our communities in so many ways. We need to find common ground between established populations and new immigrants, between businesses and the localities they serve, and between different faith traditions, racial and ethnic groups.

‘Connecting communities takes persistence, vision and above all teamwork. Trust is a fragile bridge that needs to be built every day through honesty and openness.’ The forum offered an opportunity to learn from people in different places ‘who are building bridges across divisions that have sometimes seemed unbridgeable.’ He described how, through Hope in the Cities, ‘citizens have initiated honest conversations between people of all backgrounds on matters of race, reconciliation and responsibility. They are showing that a willingness to embrace each other’s painful experiences can help heal the wounds of the past.’

This approach is spreading, and not just across America. One forum participant was Joe Devaney, until recently the Lord Mayor of Liverpool, England. During the 18th century Liverpool was England’s principal port for the slave trade. From there ships would sail a triangular route—first to West Africa where they loaded captive Africans, then to the Americas where the surviving prisoners were sold as slaves, and then to England with a cargo of tobacco or sugar. The city grew rich on this trade.

Devaney sees the racism experienced by Liverpool’s African and Asian minorities today as a legacy of the callous racial attitudes fostered by the slave trade. Under his leadership, the city council has acknowledged the harm done by the city through its involvement in the slave trade, and apologized for its role.

Devaney now heads the Reconciliation Triangle Project, which aims to make the slaving triangle one of reconciliation. A partnership has been set up between Richmond, Virginia—at one time a major North American slave trading centre—and the West African country of Benin, which sold huge numbers into slavery. Richmond citizens and the Ambassador of Benin also took part in the forum. A reconciliation sculpture created by a Liverpool artist will be sent to Benin and Richmond next year.

History is usually written by the victor, and Hope in the Cities has worked steadily to ensure the victims’ story is known too. As the American poet Maya Angelou writes: *History, despite its wrenching pain/ Cannot be unlived/ But, faced with courage/ Need not be lived again.*

While in Washington, the US Capitol, where the US Congress and Senate meet, was chosen as a place to take a further step along this path. Few people know that this symbol of global freedom was partly built by slaves. The whole forum gathered at the Capitol steps where the pain of slavery was portrayed through music and dance, and US Congressman Tony Hall spoke. He is known for calling Congress to apologize for slavery. His action has roused fierce controversy, but this has not deflected him. ‘We have got to clean out the wound of slavery in our national life,’ he told the gathering.

Then 200 people symbolically scrubbed the Capitol steps. They included Syngman Rhee, who heads the Presbyterian Church (USA). ‘We are taking this action to liberate both the oppressed and the oppressor,’ he said. ‘What happens in the US Capitol affects the rest of the world, and if we admit our injustices, we will help other countries to do that.’

The following days gave participants the chance to explore many facets of the struggle to reconcile people divided by a cruel history.

Aboriginal Australian Patrick Dodson, who chaired his country’s Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, told how a nationwide programme of study circles in the early 1990s offered Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians a chance to meet together, and tens of thousands responded.

When a government was elected in 1996 which attempted to turn its back on the harm done to Aboriginals, there was widespread resistance, and a people’s movement grew. Last year a million people took part in walks calling for apology as a step towards reconciliation, and the government has been compelled to alter course.

A live issue in the USA is the question of reparations for slavery, and this was reflected in the forum.

‘America needs to have a mature conversation about reparations to the victims of slavery, and our continuing moral obligation to Native Americans, the first citizens of this land,’ said James Forbes, Pastor of the Riverside Church in New York. He spoke alongside Donald Shriver, author of *An ethic for enemies: forgiveness in politics*.

Any strategy to overcome racism must include measures to alleviate poverty, and the forum looked at this on a world scale. ‘It is up to business to do something about global poverty because business is the only group with sufficient



Jim Wallis, Win Wallen and Charito Kruvant: overcoming poverty

resources,' said Win Wallen, a prominent American business leader.



Fr Michael Lapsely:
from victim to victor

In the view of Jim Wallis, Convenor of the Call to Renewal, only through the growth of social movements will business and governments take the necessary action. He cited the impact of the Jubilee 2000 campaign for the cancellation of Third World debt.

Charito Kruvant, of the indigenous people of Bolivia and now a US citizen, had developed the work of Creative Associates International. It supplies skilled people to meet the infrastructure needs in situations of war and poverty in 40 countries. She spoke about helping societies to 'transition from a war economy to a peace

economy'. 'We can all do something to answer the needs of crisis situations,' she said.

All three speakers have devoted their energies and resources to overcoming poverty. And that was characteristic of the whole forum. It was a discussion between deeply committed people who have paid the price of commitment. Anti-apartheid activist Father Michael Lapsely from South Africa had had his hand blown off by a letter-bomb from the apartheid government. He described how, in the aftermath of this attack, he had learned to move from being a victim to being a survivor, then a victor. Many participants found the forum similarly empowering. ■

© For A Change Magazine August/September 2001 www.forachange.co.uk

MRA Initiatives for Change – an international network of people of all faiths and backgrounds working for reconciliation, justice and the healing of history starting with change in their own lives.

www.mra-usa.org

Hope in the Cities – A pioneering program of racial healing and transformation. This growing national network, based in Richmond, Virginia engages representatives of business, government, media, faith communities and grassroots organizations in open dialogue, acknowledgment of racial history and partnership building.

www.hopeinthecities.org